

Orality, writing and new media

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1. To face the gap.

This paper is linked to the debate related to a specific question raised in the context of the conference: how can we bridge the growing gap between the oral text and the written text, a gap that has been fostered by the new media?

The new media allow us to use, memorize and simply store an increasing amount of audio and video information; in this context the role of memory and of the oral text seems to be challenged or is, at least, experiencing significant changes.

The first hypothesis of the paper is that a real gap between oral and written text doesn't exist; on the contrary cooperation, interaction and functional distinction might be noted. In particular, audiovisual texts are the result of the interaction between oral and written text. This interaction is not a complete novelty resulting from the emergence of mass media; on the contrary this interaction stems from the nature of the communication and transmission of knowledge.

The human being can acquire information in several – varied – ways without losing the abilities to read, interpret and memorize the texts. Current research in cognitive studies, linguistics and sociology of cultural processes, however, demonstrate that the modalities for the acquisition and consumption of information have changed significantly in recent years; a change has also occurred, therefore, in the individual's relationship with oral and written texts.

The second hypothesis is that the diffusion of new media and of new devices (Web, Ipad, Social Networks) undermines a knowledge system based on the dogma of linear, silent and coherent reading, of fixed genres, and of the rigid distinction between oral and written text. The rise of new technologies changes our perception of the history of communication and knowledge, and emphasizes the fact that silent and linear reading was not the exclusive mode for the acquisition of knowledge in the past either. Prior to the diffusion of new technologies, there existed a reasonably common mode of reading that was not exclusively – or even predominantly – linear: it was rhapsodic, fragmented, erratic and curi-

ous. Before the rise of Internet there existed forms of hypertextual reading. The reader has always been presented with the opportunity to move in and out of the text, to read the images, to link with other content, to underline sentences, to tear paper pages, to write and integrate the information contained in the text. The analysis of today's modalities of reading also helps us to understand and interpret the past. It highlights a mechanism that undoubtedly existed even before the rise of the new technological tools. George Landow has underlined how even the traditional texts offer examples of an implicit, non-electronic, hypertext. It is the nature of every high literary text to offer the reader the opportunity of a hypertextual reading (Landow 1992).

This analysis could be particularly interesting when applied to the study of literary texts. We can reconsider the nature and development of the literary text following the invention and consolidation of new mass media. Whenever a new medium enters the communications market, something changes in the construction, in the structure, of the literary text. Something changes too in the tastes of the readers and in the way the reader approaches the text. These considerations constitute an important instrument for the analysis of the relationship between oral and written texts, and provide a new perspective on philological studies of literature, specifically in relation to works of the first half of the XXth century which experienced the impact of such rapid change.

2. Reading, vision, hearing.

The distinction between reading, vision and hearing provides a starting point for this analysis. Roberto Simone (2000) underlines how the XXth century saw the emergence of a perceptual and cognitive mode that he refers to as "non-alphabetic vision". In this context the human being passes from a situation in which knowledge is circulated through books and writing (i.e. through the sense of sight and the alphabetic vision) to one in which knowledge circulates through hearing and non-alphabetic vision.

Four principal types of content fruition exist: 1) linear reading, 2) alphabetic vision, 3) non-linear vision where all information is perceived simultaneously through sight, and 4) non-alphabetic vision.

While alphabetic vision materializes in writing, non-alphabetic vision characterizes other media, for example television.

The senses play different roles in the acquisition of knowledge, with sight and hearing being particularly important. The invention of writing elevated the importance of sight over hearing. Audiovisual reading activities restored greater importance to hearing. Hearing is characterized by the processing of perceptions in succession; this specifically distin-

guishes hearing from seeing. Hearing provides the sense of the language and is based on a sequential appraisal process, while sight presents everything in front of us at the same moment.

Knowledge is not acquired by means of reading alone. We don't know something simply because we have read it, but also because we have absorbed information through other media. This requires changes in the interpretation of the concept of "reading" as well as in the "social vision" of reading. Reading and vision imply different levels of conviviality. Reading is a non-convivial activity, because it requires silence, individual concentration. At the same time reading is not always a merely individual activity; there are other (very important) types of reading: reading aloud, reading in public, and so forth. Vision, meaning the fruition of other (at least partially visual) media, can take place in a more shared context. Reading and vision also differ with regard to timing. Reading is slow, while vision can be quick. Reading stimulates the development of a sequential intelligence, while media such as television, for example, stimulates the formation of a simultaneous intelligence that allows us to retain a greater amount of information.

Even if a hypertextual approach to text is something that has always existed – because readers had always read hypertextually – it is nevertheless clear that the human brain receives most information in a fragmented rather than linear manner, and that this process has been radicalized in recent years. It is impossible to discuss reading today without acknowledging the complexity and variety of activities associated with the term: reading involves a complex group of activities that each individual carries out every day.

3. Reading and social relationships.

Reading must be interpreted in the context of a social system. The reader is involved in a solitary and silent activity that requires isolation. Isolation and silence are not part of the current lifestyle. This requires an effort on the part of the reader: he must find a way to isolate himself for a more or less extended period of time in order to become fully immersed in the book, while at the same time placing social connections on hold.

This effort is not always viable for an individual accustomed to sharing entertainment and information with other people. This is probably the reason for the success of hybrid communicative formats such as literary events that allow for the spectacularization, theatralization and sharing of literary contents. The new method for the acquisition and consumption of information represents a form of "secondary orality".

According to Ong (1982), second orality represents a return to orality filtered through the written language, to which it is strictly related. Ong observes that the individual, when reading written or printed texts, falls back on himself. The second orality, however, “generates a sense for group incommensurably larger than those of primary oral culture” (ONG [1982:136]). Before the rise of reading, the oral man had a very strong sense of belonging to a group, simply because there were no alternatives. In our era characterized by secondary orality, this sense is conscious and planned: the individual knows that he has to pay attention to social connections.

4. Silent reading, theatrical representation, audiovisual fruition.

Silent reading developed with the invention and diffusion of printing techniques. According to Mc Luhan (1962) typographical culture is characterized by the visual homogenization of experience and relegating the complexity of hearing and of other senses to the background. For many centuries reading meant reading aloud. Only recently has a rigid separation between eye and ear in the process of reading been imposed.

Previously, as, for example in Greek culture, “publication” took place through public reading; and this continued to be the normal method for publication over the following centuries, when the “art of reading” and books became common. According to Mc Luhan the non-literary populations spent their lives in a world composed of sounds, while modern Europe lived in a predominantly visual world.

Within the context of the fruition of audiovisual narrativity, reading takes place by means of recitation and drama representation, where there is total involvement of the spectators. The literary work allows you to relax, while the drama creates more tension. The person watching a drama experiences a heightened degree of physical and psychological tension. According to Cesare Segre the theater, as a system, is completely different to the narrative text. It is a system that requires the use of bodies, gestures, voices and costumes.

Il teatro è un sistema modellizzante secondario del tutto diverso dal testo narrativo. È un sistema che ricorre alla fisicità degli attori, delle loro voci e gesti, dei loro costumi; alla fisicità del palcoscenico, del suo apparato, dei suoi fondali; alla fisicità stessa della durata, perché lo spettacolo a cui il pubblico assiste si svolge nel tempo stesso degli enunciati che lo compongono, tempo non reversibile, analogo a quello vissuto” (Segre [1984:15]).¹

¹ “The theatrical system is completely different from the narrative one. The former is a system that uses the actors' physical presence, their voices, their gestures, their costumes; moreover it uses the physicality of the stage, of its equipment, of its scenes;

There is greater involvement of the receiver in the theatrical action than in the reading of other type of texts. And all of the other ingredients of the spectacle (stage set, customs and musical sounds) accentuate this implication and consequently the comprehension and the interpretation. The receiver is a participant; he is witness and judge, though he can only express approval or condemnation in a generic manner. The use and reception of an audiovisual text is hugely similar to the use and the enjoyment of a theatrical text. This definitively distinguishes the reader of a written text from the multimedial and audiovisual user of narrative content. The theatricalization and spectacularization of reading, together with the accentuation of vision and hearing, enable the use of contents that require a smaller degree of effort by the receiver.

5. The media reader.

The new reader manages the differences and the complex relationships between oral and written text and the mass media on a daily basis. He can be defined as a media reader:

“Il lettore che frequenta la cultura mediale si sveglia la mattina e usa un'incredibile quantità e varietà di testi e opere: la lettera del condominio, le targhe delle automobili, i manifesti pubblicitari, gli articoli del giornale, le trasmissioni della televisione, i programmi della radio. Per non parlare dei testi non scritti e non verbali che esercitano continue e forti pressioni sulla sua vita quotidiana – le vetrine, gli abiti, i percorsi metropolitani, gli oggetti con le loro materie, linee, forme, colori, disposizioni” (Rak: [151])².

According to Rak (2010), the behavior adopted by readers when reading a literary work does not differ from that observed when reading advertising, banners or movies, though he might be more interested or engaged by one form than the other.

The media reader is omnivorous; he moves without hesitation from a TV serial to a magazine, from a movie to a cartoon. These forms of media all have characters, actions and plots that serve as tools for the production of sense, just as in the literary work.

finally it uses the physicality of the duration, because the public watches the spectacle at the same time as the statements that composes it. Therefore the time is non reversible, like in real life”.

- 2 “The reader involved in the media culture weaks up in the morning and uses an incredible quantity and variety of texts and works: the administrator letter, the auto plates, the advertising manifestos, the newspaper articles, the tv programmes, the radio programmes. Non written and verbal texts do continuous and strong pressures on the everyday life: the shop windows, the clothes, the metropolitan paths, the objects with materials, lined, forms, colors, dispositions”.

The media reader is not only a consumer of written and linear texts: he is also a consumer of fragmented texts. These different types of texts were also common in the past, when literary writing took different forms: musical, theatrical, painting. Linear texts are even rarer in the present world in which subjects, plots and characters are channeled through many languages and bear the unpredictable heritage of innovation that comes from the intersection of culture and language in the multimedia world. The media reader is a consumer of audiovisual texts that experiences a return to the forms of orality and theatricalization of the narration. Thanks to the coexistence of oral and written texts and to their capacity to play different roles, the reading capacities of individuals developed. The reader/spectator, regardless of the text in question, always plays an active role. The reader engages on a daily basis in the demanding activity of interpretation of various types of texts. This is particularly true if we reflect on the fact that the reader comes into daily contact not only with linear texts like books, but also with structured and fragmented texts such as websites, social networks, movies, soap operas, trailers and videogames.

These texts require and facilitate a hypertextual reading, where the hypertext is understood – in line with Bolter's theory (2001) – as the interconnection of a group of symbolic elements and as a text that contains fragmented episodes and a range of instruments to accompany each decision.

7. Oral, written and hypertextual texts.

When a reader moves between the oral and the written text, he is undertaking a hypertextual reading activity. The hypertextual links are paths of meaning, available to authors and readers. They serve to guide the reader, who has come to expect this. Though he wishes to be guided along a hypertextual reading path, he also wants to choose his starting-point and determine which streets to follow, without the indication of the author. This is why reading generates different texts, created by the receiver and his interaction with the tools provided by the author. According to Iser (1980) the action of reading is always necessary for the construction and activation of the meaning of texts. All texts are the direct consequence of a reading action. Reading is the concrete action that facilitates the creation of the literary object that resembles a strange whirling that only works when it is in motion (Sartre 1947). A reading activity exists if there is dynamic interaction between the "player" and the text that requires a concrete action able to generate a new text.

It is through interaction and cooperation between reader and author that a text is constructed and defined. The protagonist of a reading action moves within a complex textual system as through a labyrinth (Cal-

vino's novel *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* – where a first interpretation of an hypertextual reader is sketched – provides an example of the reading labyrinth).

8. Literature remediation.

New mass media can change our approach to other media, to visual texts and also to literature. According to Jim Collins's theory, defined in *Bring on the Books for Everybody* (2010), at the moment that literary culture became popular culture, the importance of approaching the study of literature from a new perspective emerged. Literature changed with the diffusion of mass media, and we must reconsider the power of images: "most individual entertainment is no longer enjoyed in the confines of the darkened theater but on screens that come in a seemingly endless variety of formats and locations, from Ipods to laptops to theme park sensory extravaganzas" (Collins [2010:4]). Literature certainly changed with the rise of the new media. Gradually, as a new medium was invented and launched, it changed the way that literature presented itself to readers and the way readers approached the text. The way we are accustomed to reading has also changed; it has become a more social activity, possible to share. For example, the written text now is read from the point of view of a spectator. The media can remedialize the reality and also change the way we read. Collins has also observed that the methods and situations of appreciating literary fiction have changed profoundly. "[S]o has the literary fiction written for those passionate readers who watch television book clubs, cruise Amazon or take literature in cinematic form at the local Multiplex or via Netflix" (Collins [2010:4]). Collins seeks to determine how these changes in the field of literature – the expanding number of titles, the ubiquity and velocity of the delivery systems in the form of superstores and online book sales, the increasing synergy among publishing, movie, television and Internet industries and finally the exponential increase in targeting quality consumers – all combine to influence the status of "the book" and the nature of literacy at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Collins claims that it is no longer possible to speak of contemporary literature without taking superstores, blockbuster films adaptations and television book clubs into consideration: not just as symptoms of the current state of the culture industry, but as the sites where these products are consumed. This refers again to the interaction between oral and written texts that represents the background for the creation of each audiovisual text, and to the hypertextual approach that the reader inevitably employs when negotiating the various texts he encounters be they literary, television or electronic texts. The reader always moves in and out of the text by following all of the different textual links.

Another interesting perspective is offered by Julian Murphet 2009. The author observes that:

literature's sudden self-recognition as a medium-which I will be pursuing in more depth below-had more to do with its metaphoric ability to absorb material qualities from the more substantial media around it; and this is really what we mean when we say that the modernist text is medially self-aware (Murphet [2009: 5).

Murphet provides several effective examples of the remediation of the literature, beginning with the photography. The invention of photography gave rise to an increase in publication of illustrated periodicals and, consequently, illustrated books. The typology of the illustrations also changed; they referred more and more to pictures. This occurs because the audience's taste changes each time they come into contact with new media. The publisher, by applying the new photomechanical process to the printing industry, finds a new way to illustrate his books in order to attract the public's attention in a new way. Remediation, as Mc Luhan theorized (1962), is the process of representation and inglobation of one medium in another. The introduction of a new medium or technology into a culture always implies reflection and self-examination on the part of the culture that absorbs it. The invention of a new medium is always an occasion for a society to begin a discussion about itself. Some technological developments that have interested the media system over the years include: "telegraphy, photography, typewriting, machine-set printing, photomechanical printing, the cheap rotary press, telephony, recorded sound on wax cylinder and phonograph, stereoscopes, electric light, early cinema exhibitions, nickelodeon kinetoscopes, wireless radio, facsimile machines, teletype and television" (Murphet [2009: 14).

Not only do the old media absorb the new media and undergo changes in their features when the latter appear to represent new important forms of communication, another tendency also occurs: the new media requires stories, characters, plots and scenes and these are very often selected from, and based on, the old media. As Virginia Woolf (1950) underlined, cinema, for example, is like a rapacious carnivore that appropriates ideas and formats from literature, instead of creating new contents.

All these considerations are framed against the background of the collective research program (GOA) "Literature and its Multiple Identities (1900-1950)" at the Department of Literary Studies, Faculty of Arts, KUL Leuven. This research program considers the dynamic identity of modern European literature by undertaking a multifaceted and comparative analysis of a uniquely varied period. The program is not limited to the study of canonized literary texts; it also investigates non-canonical works and non-verbal aspects of literature such as images, sounds and

metaliterary forms of communication. The project focuses on the relationship between literary and non-literary text with other non-literary texts, also taking into account the non-verbal elements. Additionally, the program pays special attention to the relationship between literature and its public (audience) via the study of so-called “middlebrow” literature: texts which are explicitly directed at a wider audience and thereby function as important mediators between experimental and traditional literary tendencies. This is interesting, because the middlebrow literature that developed at the beginning of the century can provide us with an effective example of the capacity of the media to remedialize the reality and also to change the way we read.

9. Conclusions.

To conclude, the reflections arising from the analysis of the different theoretical approaches could be summarized as follows: i) the method of knowledge and information acquisition changed from one in which the central role was constituted by the book and writing – and consequently by sight – to one in which the most important sense is hearing and thus “non-alphabetic sight” takes place. In general, audiovisual reading conferred major importance on hearing; ii) audiovisual communication enabled significant sharing and a broad vision. According to Ong a return to a secondary orality has taken place; iii) despite such significant changes in the reading activity no real gap exists between the oral and written text: rather there is a compenetration and a coexistence that developed the hypertextual reading ability of the individual; iv) the written text does not die with the arrival of new media and with technological change: rather new technologies have emerged that allow for exchange and a circulation of a greater quantity of texts, including written ones; v) new technologies require fragmented and hypertextual reading methods which have always formed part of human reading ability despite the dogmatic suggestion that linear and silent reading is the sole possible option; vi) the media reader, with his hypertextual reading abilities, moves through oral and written texts with naturalness and competence; vii) with the invention of new media, the literary text experienced a process of remediation that radically changed its structure and nature; viii) the way in which stories, literary styles, images and book covers changed at the beginning of the XXth century is evidence of the permeability of the written text, particularly the literary text and of its capacity to be conditioned and “contaminated” by iconic and audiovisual texts; ix) literature includes iconic and narrative structures common to other media, and speaks to a new audience, capable of engaging in hypertextual reading.

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